THE ANTIQUITY OF JAINISM

A Chronological History of Digambara Jain Inscriptions and Archaeological Evidence

From the Third Century Before Christ to the Present Day

(Part 1-5)

General Preface

This is a chronological history assembling, in sequence, the principal physical evidence — inscriptions, sculpted images, excavated shrines, stupas, and cave temples — bearing on the history of the Digambara Jain tradition in the Indian subcontinent. The aim is not to retell Jain religious history as it is preserved in narrative scripture, but to lay out what survives in stone, terracotta, and copper, in the order the archaeological and epigraphic record allows it to be dated, and to identify, wherever the evidence and scholarship permit, the dynasty and the individual king under whose rule each object was made or each inscription was cut.

Two methodological choices shape everything that follows and are stated here at the outset rather than left implicit. First, this history is written from within, and in defence of, the Digambara reading of the tradition's material past. Where the earliest surviving Jina images can be classified by iconography, the sky-clad (nude, kayotsarga) image is treated as the anchor of the Digambara thread of evidence, as against the girdled, ornamented, and later crown-and-jewellery-bearing images associated with Shvetambara usage. Where a claim about the community's history rests on testimony that survives only in Shvetambara or in Buddhist narrative literature, that dependence is flagged rather than passed over — this book does not treat those bodies of literature as reliable witnesses to Digambara history, and prefers, wherever it can, epigraphic and archaeological evidence that does not depend on them.

Second, the book tries to hold two things in tension that are often collapsed into one another in popular accounts of Jain antiquity: the age of a tradition, and the age of the surviving evidence for that tradition. A story told about the third century BCE is not the same thing as a stone inscribed in the third century BCE, and this book tries never to let the first stand in for the second without saying so.

A word on sources. Alongside the primary epigraphic corpora — the Archaeological Survey of India's excavation reports, the district gazetteers, and the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century compilations of Indian inscriptions — this history draws throughout on Babu Kamta Prasad Jain's Some Historical Jaina Kings and Heroes (Arrah, 1941), an early and still valuable attempt to gather the dynastic history bound up with Jain, and specifically Digambara, patronage into a single connected account. Where later epigraphic discoveries have superseded or complicated

Kamta Prasad Jain's conclusions, this is noted; where his identifications still hold, he is cited directly.

A word on tone, too. The chapters that follow are written to be read by anyone with a general interest in India's past, not only by specialists — narrative, plain-spoken, with the disputes and the honest gaps left visible rather than smoothed over, but never written as though a textbook footnote were the point of the exercise.

The Full Chronology — A Roadmap

Chapters are added to this single, continuously growing document as they are completed.

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PART I

THE EARLIEST DIGAMBARA RECORD

Before and Around the Mauryan Age

Chapter One — The Barli Inscription

1.1 Discovery in the Aravalli Foothills

In 1912, the pioneering Rajasthani historian and epigraphist Gaurishankar Hirachand Ojha, working through the hill tracts southeast of Ajmer, recovered a small, broken fragment of a stone pillar in the village of Bhinaika, near the town of Barli, roughly thirty-six miles from the city. The fragment measured barely thirteen inches by ten — modest by the standards of the great Mauryan pillars Ashoka had raised across the subcontinent a century or two earlier — yet it carried on its face a short inscription in the Brahmi script that would eventually be recognised as one of the very oldest surviving records of organised Jain devotion anywhere in India.

Ojha was, by the time of this discovery, already building the foundations of modern Rajasthani epigraphy as a discipline; he would go on to direct the Rajputana Museum at Ajmer and to compile some of the region's earliest systematic inscription surveys. He published his reading of the Barli fragment in the years following its discovery, and it entered the scholarly literature as the Barli inscription — occasionally also rendered Badli, after the more commonly used modern name of the nearby town. Unlike the grand royal proclamations of the Mauryan and Shunga courts, the Barli inscription is a modest, almost private object: a dedicatory label, cut by or for an individual devotee, addressed not to a king's subjects but to a Bhagavan — a Lord, an object of personal reverence.

1.2 Reading the Stone: Script, Language, Text

The inscription is cut in early Brahmi, the same family of script used in Ashoka's edicts, and its language is Prakrit, the vernacular register that carried Jain and Buddhist religious literature through the final centuries before the common era, distinct from the Sanskrit of the Brahmanical court and of later royal chancelleries. Ojha's reading of the surviving text runs, in transliteration, Viraya Bhagavate chaturasiti vase — which he took to mean "dedicated to the Lord Vira, in the eighty-fourth year." On this reading, Vira is Vardhamana Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Tirthankara, addressed with the honorific Bhagavan that Jain usage reserves for its liberated teachers. The "eighty-fourth year" would then refer to a count of years reckoned from Mahavira's nirvana — an era that later Jain chronology placed at 527 or 510 BCE, depending on which of the tradition's own calculations is followed.

Not every scholar has accepted Ojha's reading. D. C. Sircar, one of the most exacting epigraphists to work on early Indian inscriptions in the twentieth century, argued that the fragmentary text more plausibly names the Shunga king Bhagavata — a ruler otherwise attested on coinage and in the Puranic dynastic lists — rather than invoking Mahavira as Bhagavan. If Sircar's reading is preferred, the Barli fragment records something closer to a regnal dating formula than an explicit religious dedication, though even on this construction the stone's association with a Jain devotional or commemorative context is not seriously disputed by anyone who has examined it in relation to the surrounding archaeological material from the same corner of Rajasthan.

1.3 The Battle Over a Date

The date of the Barli inscription has occasioned one of the longer-running small controversies in Indian epigraphy, and it is worth setting the competing positions out plainly rather than adjudicating between them by fiat. Ojha's own calculation — reading "eighty-four" as a count of years since Mahavira's nirvana — placed the inscription at approximately 443 BCE. If accepted at face value, that would make Barli not merely the oldest Jain inscription in Rajasthan but one of the oldest datable inscriptions of any kind on the Indian subcontinent, predating even the Ashokan corpus by more than a century and a half.

Later generations of epigraphists have generally been more cautious, working from the letter-forms alone rather than from the content of the text. The angle of the strokes, the treatment of vowel-marks, and the overall development of the script on the Barli stone struck most twentieth-century paleographers as too advanced to sit comfortably beside the Ashokan Brahmi of the mid-third century BCE, let alone anything two centuries older still. On this reasoning, most modern epigraphic opinion has settled on a considerably later window, in the second or first century BCE, treating "eighty-four" as referring to some other regnal or era count rather than to years since Mahavira's own lifetime.

A third position, associated in more recent scholarship with the historian Dr. Rima Hooja, splits the difference in the other direction, arguing for a placement in the fifth to fourth century BCE — later than Ojha's own reading but still remarkably early, and still broadly compatible with a

dedication reckoned in years from Mahavira's own era rather than from a later dynastic reference point.

For the purposes of this chronology, the Barli inscription is treated as belonging to the broad window running from the fifth to the second century BCE, with a working placement in the third century BCE — a position that falls inside every serious scholarly proposal advanced for the stone without adjudicating definitively between Ojha, Sircar, and Hooja. What can be said with confidence, whichever end of that range one prefers, is that even the most conservative dating on offer — the second-to-first-century-BCE paleographic reading — still makes Barli one of the earliest surviving Jain inscriptions in India, predating the bulk of the Mathura and Kalinga material examined in the chapters that follow by a matter of centuries.

1.4 What Barli Tells Us About Early Digambara Rajasthan

Whatever its precise date, the Barli inscription establishes a fact of real importance to the chronology this book is assembling: Jainism was not a religion that arrived in Rajasthan late, carried in only by the medieval merchant guilds and courtly patronage that produced the region's much more famous later temple architecture. It was already present, organised enough to commission inscribed stone, and devotionally focused on Mahavira by name, in the same broad period that produced the Lohanipur torso at the opposite end of the Gangetic plain and the first Mauryan imperial inscriptions that gave the subcontinent a durable epigraphic habit at all.

The inscription's silence on sectarian affiliation is itself worth noting. It addresses Bhagavan Vira without any of the iconographic or textual markers that would, in later centuries, distinguish Digambara from Shvetambara usage. In the centuries before the split between the sky-clad and white-clad traditions had hardened into full institutional and doctrinal separation, a dedication like Barli's belongs to an undivided community's devotion to its Tirthankara. It is only with the appearance of datable image evidence — beginning, on the present reconstruction, with the Lohanipur torso discussed in the next chapter — that the specifically Digambara thread of that community's material culture becomes independently traceable in sculptural form. Barli anchors this chronology's earliest secure point in textual-epigraphic terms; Lohanipur anchors it in sculptural terms; and it is the convergence of the two, arising from the same broad centuries and

the same general cultural world, that gives the "earliest Digambara record" explored in this Part its weight.

It is also worth situating Barli within the wider pattern of Rajasthan's ancient settlement archaeology. The region's early historic sites — Ojha's own broader survey work touched on settlements such as Nagari, ancient Madhyamika, near present-day Chittorgarh, occupied from around the fourth century BCE onward — show a landscape of small but organised polities and religious communities well before the Gupta-era temple building that later came to define popular ideas of "ancient Rajasthan." The Barli stone belongs to this earlier, sparer, and far less monumental phase of the region's religious history: a phase documented mostly in fragments, coin legends, and short votive inscriptions rather than in standing architecture, and one in which a modest thirteen-by-ten-inch stone can carry disproportionate historical weight precisely because so little else from the period survives at all.

Chapter Two — The Lohanipur Torso

2.1 A Mauryan Capital, A Buried Shrine

Ancient Pataliputra — modern Patna — was the seat of the Mauryan empire under Chandragupta, Bindusara, and Ashoka, and its remains lie scattered and layered beneath the modern city in a way that has made its archaeology unusually piecemeal. The Archaeological Survey of India's excavations at Kumhrar, five kilometres east of Patna railway station, had already begun to reveal the scale of the Mauryan capital by the time attention turned to the smaller locality of Lohanipur. L. A. Waddell had opened trial trenches at nearby Bulandi Bagh as early as 1895; David Brainard Spooner's excavations of 1912-13 at Kumhrar uncovered the first pillar of what would prove to be an eighty-pillared Mauryan assembly hall, a discovery so significant that it anchored Pataliputra firmly on the archaeological map of early India. It was into this same layered, Mauryan-saturated ground that the Lohanipur excavation of 1937 cut.

2.2 The 1937 Excavation and Its Two Torsos

The Lohanipur excavation, documented in detail by the historian K. P. Jayaswal — who a few years later would also be closely associated with the renewed Kumhrar excavations of the early 1950s — uncovered two torsos of polished sandstone at a site identified as the remains of a square-shaped shrine. The larger of the two figures stands close to two feet in height; a smaller companion piece, now generally referred to as Lohanipur II, stands only about a foot tall. Jayaswal reported that a Mauryan coin and a quantity of Mauryan-period brick were recovered from the same shrine foundations, giving the find an archaeological context that pointed, from the outset, toward a Mauryan or near-Mauryan date rather than a much later one.

Both figures are nude — carved without any drapery, girdle, or ornament across the torso — and both were identified by Jayaswal, and subsequently by the art historian M. A. Dhaky and successive generations of scholars, as images of a Jina, a liberated Tirthankara, rendered in the standing kayotsarga meditation posture that Digambara iconography would continue to use, essentially unchanged in its essentials, for the next two thousand years.

2.3 Reading a Naked Body: Style, Polish, and the Case for a Mauryan Date

The case for dating the larger Lohanipur torso to the Mauryan period rests substantially on its surface treatment. The stone carries what art historians call Mauryan polish: an extraordinarily fine, glassy finish achieved through a technique that appears, so far as the archaeological record shows, almost exclusively on Mauryan-period stonework — the famous Ashokan pillars chief among it — and that seems to fall out of use fairly quickly once the Mauryan court's own workshops ceased to operate at that level of technical investment. A sculpture bearing this polish, found in direct association with Mauryan coinage and brickwork, presents about as strong a circumstantial case for a third-century BCE date as Indian archaeology is generally able to offer for an isolated stone image lacking its own inscription.

On this reading, conventionally cited as spanning the third century BCE to perhaps the second century CE to allow for some uncertainty at the later end, the Lohanipur torso becomes the earliest surviving Digambara Jina image in the archaeological record — earlier than anything recovered from Mathura, earlier than the Kalinga material at Udayagiri and Khandagiri, and earlier by a wide margin than the great bulk of surviving Jina sculpture from anywhere in India.

2.4 The Dissenting View: A Later, Kushana-Age Torso?

Not every scholar has accepted the Mauryan attribution without qualification. A minority position, noted in the more recent art-historical literature, argues for a later date — not earlier than the Kushana period, several centuries after Ashoka — and points to what its proponents read as Graeco-Roman stylistic influence in the modelling of the figure's musculature and stance, an influence that entered Indian sculptural practice most visibly through the Gandharan and Mathura schools of the first centuries of the common era rather than through anything demonstrably Mauryan.

This dissenting view has not displaced the Mauryan attribution in the mainstream literature, not least because it has to explain away the coin-and-brick context of the find and the technical difficulty of reproducing genuine Mauryan-style polish at a much later date — a technique that, so far as the record shows, was never fully recovered once it lapsed. But it is a live position in the scholarship, and this chronology records it as such rather than presenting the Mauryan date as beyond all challenge. What is not seriously disputed, on either dating, is the identification of the

figure as a nude Jina image and its consequent importance to any history of Digambara iconography specifically.

2.5 The Indus Comparison — A Tempting but Unproven Parallel

One further comparison recurs in discussions of the Lohanipur torso and deserves to be recorded here precisely because it should not be overstated. The figure has repeatedly been compared, on grounds of general pose and modelling, to the grey stone "torso" excavated at Harappa in 1928-29 — a Mature Harappan-period find whose own dating has itself been disputed across a very wide range, from the height of the Indus civilisation down to as late as the Gupta period in some minority readings. The resemblance has tempted some writers toward the claim that Jain iconographic conventions, or even organised proto-Jain devotion, reach back into the Indus Valley Civilisation itself.

That claim cannot presently be treated as established. The Harappan figure's own date is contested, its find-context does not connect it demonstrably to any textual or religious tradition that can be called Jain, and the resemblance in pose between two nude standing male torsos, separated by well over a thousand years on any reasonable reading of either object's date, is not on its own sufficient evidence of religious continuity. This chronology accordingly does not treat the Indus Valley as a confirmed starting point for Digambara material history — the Lohanipur torso, not the Harappan one, is where the documented record of nude Jina imagery actually begins — while noting, as a matter of scholarly record, that the visual comparison exists and continues to be debated.

2.6 Why Lohanipur Matters to Digambara History

The importance of the Lohanipur torso to a Digambara-focused chronology is straightforward to state even where its precise date remains open to argument. It is the earliest surviving sculptural instance of the sky-clad, unadorned Jina image that would remain the defining visual marker of Digambara identity for the next two millennia, found not in a later Digambara heartland such as Karnataka or Bundelkhand but at the very centre of Mauryan imperial power, in a shrine built with Mauryan brick beside a Mauryan coin. Whatever position one takes on the fine-grained dating debate, Lohanipur places the essential Digambara iconographic convention — nudity as the visual expression of complete renunciation — at or very near the beginning of the datable

archaeological record for Jina imagery as such, rather than as a later variant that split off from some prior, differently depicted norm. The torso today remains in the Patna Museum, a short distance from the Kumhrar grounds where the same excavators were, in the same years, uncovering the pillared hall of the Mauryan court itself.

Chapter Three — Chandragupta, Bhadrabahu, and the Mauryan-Shunga Record

3.1 Ashoka's Pillar Edict VII and the Niganthas

The single most secure piece of Mauryan-period epigraphic evidence for organised Jain ascetic life anywhere in India has nothing to do with Digambara tradition or hagiography at all — it is a line from the state's own imperial epigraphy. In Pillar Edict VII, issued toward the end of his reign, Ashoka records the administrative structure he had put in place to look after the welfare of the religious communities under his rule: "I have ordered that they should be occupied with the affairs of the Sangha. I have also ordered that they should be occupied with the affairs of the Brahmans and the Ajivikas. I have ordered that they be occupied with the Niganthas." The Niganthas named alongside the Buddhist Sangha, the Brahmans, and the Ajivikas are the Nirgranthas — "those without bonds" — the term by which Jain ascetics were known across the wider religious landscape of early historic India, including in Buddhist sources of the period.

This is sect-neutral, contemporary, and unambiguous: by the third century BCE, Jain renunciants were sufficiently numerous and organised to be treated by the Mauryan state as one of the four principal religious communities requiring dedicated officers of welfare, ranked alongside the Buddhist monastic order itself. It is the firmest anchor this chronology has for the presence of an organised Jain ascetic community during the reign of a specific, precisely dated Mauryan emperor, and it stands independently of the more famous — but epigraphically much less well-attested — tradition of Chandragupta Maurya's own conversion, discussed in the sections that follow.

3.2 The Bhadrabahu Tradition: Famine, Migration, and a Prophecy

Digambara tradition holds that Acharya Bhadrabahu, reckoned as the last of the Shrutakevalins — those who retained complete mastery of the Jain scriptural canon in living memory — foresaw a twelve-year famine bearing down on the Magadhan heartland of the Mauryan empire. In response, he is said to have led a substantial body of Jain monks southward and westward, out of the famine's path, on a journey of well over two thousand kilometres that ended in the hill country of what is now southern Karnataka. Among those who accompanied him, according to the same tradition, was Chandragupta Maurya himself — the founder of the Mauryan dynasty —

who had by then abdicated his throne, embraced Jain monastic renunciation, and joined Bhadrabahu's company as an ordinary ascetic.

The tradition places this migration at approximately 300 BCE, toward the very end of Chandragupta's reign or shortly after his abdication in favour of his son Bindusara. It further holds that both Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta ended their lives on the hill at Shravanabelagola by undertaking sallekhana, the ritual fast unto death by which a Jain ascetic who judges his life's purpose fulfilled relinquishes the body deliberately and without violence. The hill on which this is said to have occurred — earlier known by the name Kalbappu — is today called Chandragiri, "Chandra's hill," a name Digambara tradition derives directly from Chandragupta's presence and death there.

3.3 Chandragiri Hill and the Name of a Renunciant-Emperor

Physically, Chandragiri today carries the accumulated religious architecture of well over a thousand years: a cluster of Jain temples (basadis) including the Chandragupta Basadi, local tradition around a cave in which Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta are said to have meditated together, and — inside one of the temples on the hill — a sculptural frieze depicting a set of dreams traditionally attributed to Chandragupta before his renunciation. Of the two hills at Shravanabelagola, Chandragiri carries the greater concentration of the site's oldest memorial inscriptions: of the roughly 106 nishidhi memorial inscriptions recorded across Shravanabelagola as a whole, some 92 are found on Chandragiri alone, commemorating monks, nuns, and lay householders who undertook sallekhana there across many centuries.

3.4 The Epigraphic Gap: Tradition, Later Confirmation, and Honest Uncertainty

Here this chronology must apply the same discipline to Digambara tradition that it applies everywhere else: the earliest surviving inscriptions at Chandragiri that explicitly invoke the Bhadrabahu-Chandragupta narrative date from a period considerably later than the events themselves. The bulk of the hill's memorial inscriptions belong to the seventh and eighth centuries CE and afterward — a gap of roughly a thousand years between the tradition's own third-century-BCE setting and the earliest surviving stone that records it in anything like its familiar form. No inscription contemporary with Chandragupta Maurya's own lifetime has been recovered from Shravanabelagola confirming his presence there, and none should be expected:

an obscure hill in what was then a remote part of the peninsula, centuries before it became a major Digambara pilgrimage centre in its own right, is not a place the surviving Mauryan imperial record would have had any occasion to mention.

This is not, on its own, a reason to dismiss the tradition — oral and institutional memory within a continuously surviving monastic lineage is a form of evidence, even if it is not the same form of evidence as a contemporary inscription, and the tradition is attested with remarkable consistency across later Digambara epigraphy and literature from the medieval period onward, including in the dynastic material collected by Kamta Prasad Jain. But intellectual honesty requires stating plainly that the Chandragupta-Bhadrabahu migration, as a datable historical event witnessed by a contemporary inscription, belongs to the category of well-attested later tradition rather than to the category of directly evidenced Mauryan-period archaeology, in the way that Ashoka's Pillar Edict VII or the Mauryan brick and coin beneath the Lohanipur shrine are directly evidenced. This chronology records the tradition in full, because no history of Digambara Karnataka can responsibly omit it, but it does so as tradition, corroborated from the seventh century CE onward, rather than as an inscription contemporary with the third century BCE.

3.5 Placing the Tradition Within the Chronology

Taken together, the three strands examined in this chapter — Ashoka's own epigraphic acknowledgment of the Nirgranthas as one of the empire's four recognised religious communities, the Digambara tradition of Chandragupta Maurya's renunciation and southward migration under Bhadrabahu, and the much later inscriptional record at Chandragiri that preserves and elaborates that tradition — sketch the outer boundary of what the Mauryan-Shunga period can be made to yield for Digambara history. Read alongside the Barli inscription and the Lohanipur torso examined in the two preceding chapters, they establish that by the third century BCE, at both ends of the subcontinent — in the Aravalli foothills of Rajasthan and at the Mauryan capital itself — a Jain community already existed with enough organisation to commission inscribed stone and enough imperial standing to be named in the emperor's own edicts, and that within a generation or two of that same period, by the community's own enduring memory, its southward expansion into Karnataka had already begun. The chapters that follow move to Kalinga, where for the first time a king's own inscription speaks directly, in his own words, of his devotion to the Jina.

PART II

KHARAVELA'S KALINGA

c. 200 – 100 BC

Chapter Four — The Hathigumpha Inscription and the Caves of Udayagiri

4.1 A King Carved in Stone

Picture a low, rounded hill on the outskirts of what is now Bhubaneswar, its sandstone worn smooth by two thousand years of monsoon rain. Halfway up its southern face is a shallow, open cave that local people had long called Hathigumpha — the Elephant Cave, after two carved elephants that once flanked its mouth. For centuries nobody thought to look closely at the walls of this unremarkable cavern. Then, in the 1820s, a British officer named A. Sterling noticed that the ceiling and the rock face inside were covered edge to edge with an inscription — seventeen crowded lines of an old script, running partly across the front of the cave and partly overhead, where anyone reading it would have had to crane their neck backward.

Sterling published a first notice of the find in 1825. Over the following decades a small relay team of some of the most famous names in early Indian epigraphy took their turn at the text: James Prinsep, the scholar who had cracked the Brahmi script itself, made an eye-copy in 1837; Alexander Cunningham, the father of Indian archaeology, traced it again in 1877; and it was a Bombay scholar named Bhagwan Lal Indraji who first worked out that the king being praised in the inscription was called Kharavela — a name that had, until then, appeared nowhere else in the historical record. Later scholars, including K. P. Jayaswal and R. D. Banerji, refined the reading further, correcting a number of earlier mistakes along the way. Even today, weathering has eaten into a few of the letters, and a handful of words remain genuinely disputed. But the broad shape of the text — and the man it describes — is no longer in doubt.

4.2 Who Was Kharavela?

Kharavela ruled Kalinga, the ancient kingdom that covered roughly the coastal stretch of modern Odisha, at some point in what scholars now generally place in the second half of the first century BCE, though the exact dating has been argued over for a hundred years and older estimates pushed the date back a century or two further. Part of the difficulty is that the inscription tries to fix Kharavela's reign against events elsewhere in India — including a retreating Greek, or Yavana, king — and early scholars who tried to match that Greek ruler to a specific, well-known Bactrian king ended up dragging the whole chronology of early Indian history out of position by

two or three centuries before the mistake was caught. The lesson historians drew from that episode is a useful one to keep in mind throughout this book: a single misidentified name in an old inscription can quietly bend an entire timeline out of shape, and it pays to hold dates a little more loosely than the neat numbers in a textbook suggest.

What is not in doubt is that Kharavela was a Jain — the inscription says so more or less in its opening breath, describing him as a devotee of the Arhats and Siddhas, the liberated souls of Jain belief — and that he ruled Kalinga at a moment of real regional power, strong enough to send armies west against the Satavahanas and north against Magadha, the old Mauryan heartland. He is, without much competition, the earliest Jain king anywhere in India whose life we know not from later legend, not from a monk's biography written centuries afterward, but from a document he commissioned about himself, in his own reign, on the wall of a cave that still exists.

4.3 Thirteen Years, Carved Line by Line

The Hathigumpha inscription reads like a king's own highlight reel, year by year, and it is worth walking through it in something like that spirit rather than as a dry list of dates. In his very first year on the throne, Kharavela is already at work repairing the gates, ramparts, and buildings of his capital that a storm had damaged, and laying out gardens at what the inscription is careful to note was considerable personal expense — an early and recurring theme of the text is Kharavela wanting posterity to know exactly how much he spent on public works. By his fifth year he had extended a canal first dug generations earlier under the old Nanda dynasty, bringing water into his capital, and he marked the occasion of a royal Rajasuya sacrifice by remitting taxes and dues owed by his subjects.

The middle years turn to war and diplomacy. In his eighth year Kharavela's forces struck at a hill fortress called Goradhagiri and pressed hard enough on Rajagaha — the old Magadhan capital — that a Greek king in the region is said to have pulled his forces back in alarm, retreating as far as Mathura. By his tenth year Kharavela was mixing threats, alliances, and outright conquest to bring the wider region called Bharatavasa under his influence, coming home with treasure and tribute. In his twelfth and thirteenth years, having broken up rival confederacies and brought several of Magadha's own kings to heel, he turned that hard-won wealth toward religious giving

— donations to Jain monks that the inscription records with the same careful precision it uses for his public works.

4.4 The Lost Jina and the King Who Brought It Home

Buried in this year-by-year account is a single phrase that has mattered enormously to Jain history ever since scholars first puzzled it out: a reference to something called the Ka[li]ngajina — the "Jina of Kalinga" — which, the inscription says, an earlier Nanda king had carried away from Kalinga long before, and which Kharavela himself brought back home. It is easy to read this quickly and miss how remarkable it is. Here, in a king's own contemporary record, is a claim that Kalinga once possessed something sacred enough to be worth an enemy carrying it off as war-plunder, and important enough that recovering it, generations later, was worth boasting about on the wall of a cave.

Most scholars who have written on the passage take the Kalinga Jina to mean an image, or possibly the seat or throne associated with an image, of a Tirthankara — physical evidence, in other words, of image worship in Kalinga reaching back at least to the Nanda period, which is to say back toward the fourth century BCE, uncomfortably close in time to the Barli inscription and the Lohanipur torso discussed in Part I. Not every scholar agrees with that reading, however. The art historian Sonya Quintanilla has argued that the phrase should not automatically be read as referring to a figural idol at all, pointing out that other evidence from the same broad period suggests Jain worship in this era may still have centred on symbols and relics rather than on anthropomorphic images of the Tirthankaras. This chronology records both readings rather than picking a winner: if Quintanilla is right, the Kalinga Jina was some other object of veneration, not a statue; if the majority reading is right, it is one more thread — alongside Lohanipur — pointing toward organised image worship reaching back to the fourth century BCE. Either way, the passage confirms something worth holding onto: Kalinga's Jain identity, in Kharavela's own telling, was not something he invented. It was old enough, and important enough, to have already been fought over a century or more before he was born.

4.5 A Hillside Full of Monks' Cells

The inscription itself tells us what Kharavela did with some of that hard-won thirteenth-year wealth: he had cells cut into the rock of what he calls the Kumari hill — the same hill range that

today carries the names Udayagiri and Khandagiri — as resting places for Arhats, the Jain community's enlightened teachers and monks. Kharavela's own cave-cutting was only the beginning. Over the following two or three centuries, the two hills filled up with dozens of small excavated chambers, forming one of the oldest and largest complexes of rock-cut Jain monastic dwellings anywhere in India.

The most striking of these caves is not Hathigumpha itself but a neighbour known as Rani Gumpha, the "Queen's Cave" — a much grander, two-storey excavation cut around three sides of a small courtyard, its lower storey a row of plain monks' cells and its upper storey an open, pillared verandah. Both levels once carried carved friezes showing processions, hunting scenes, and courtly life, worn today but still legible in outline, and scholars have argued for well over a century about whether these scenes illustrate episodes from Kharavela's own life, an old Jain legend, or simply generic royal pageantry. The cells themselves are austere almost to the point of severity — bare stone rooms just large enough to lie down in, with a slightly raised stone ridge at one end that served as a pillow. That plainness is not an accident. It is the same renunciate austerity that the naked Jina at Lohanipur expresses in sculptural form: a tradition, already visible in the second and first centuries BCE, that measured holiness by how little a person needed rather than by how much they had.

4.6 Why Kharavela Matters to Digambara History

It would be easy to let Kharavela pass by as simply one more ancient king with an unusually chatty inscription. But set beside the material examined in Part I, his cave takes on a larger significance. Barli gave this history its earliest devotional text; Lohanipur gave it its earliest sculptural image; Kharavela gives it something neither of the other two can offer on its own — a king's own voice, dated to his own reign, describing himself as a Jain, describing a sacred image old enough to have been fought over a century before he lived, and describing, in exact and almost bureaucratic detail, the monastic cells he cut into a hillside for the ascetics of his faith. Nothing in this chapter depends on a Shvetambara chronicle or a Buddhist narrative text written centuries after the fact. It depends on a king talking about himself, on a wall he had carved for that exact purpose, in a cave you can still climb up to and stand inside today. From here, the story moves north and west again, to the banks of the Yamuna at Mathura, where the Kushana age

would leave behind the single richest body of early Jain sculpture and inscription anywhere in India.

PART III

KUSHANA MATHURA, THE DIGAMBARA STUPA

1st Century BC – 3rd Century CE

Chapter Five — The Kankali Tila Excavations and the Mathura Jain Stupa

5.1 A Mound Named After a Goddess

On the southern edge of the old city of Mathura, on the west bank of the Yamuna, there is a low, rectangular mound about five hundred feet long and three hundred and fifty feet wide, known today as Kankali Tila — the mound of Kankali, after a small modern temple to the goddess that still stands on part of it. Nothing about its present appearance suggests what turned out to be buried beneath: the single richest concentration of early Jain sculpture and inscription ever recovered anywhere in India, a body of material so large that it alone would justify treating Mathura as the great hinge-point of this entire chronology, the place where the sparse, scattered evidence of the earlier chapters suddenly becomes a flood.

Mathura in the centuries around the turn of the common era was one of the great cities of northern India — a river-crossing, a trading hub, and, under the Kushana emperors, effectively a second capital of an empire that stretched from Central Asia to the Gangetic plain. It was also, the Kankali Tila excavations would eventually show, a city in which Jain, Buddhist, and Brahmanical religious life flourished side by side, each leaving its own mark on the same crowded stretch of riverside ground.

5.2 Six Digs Across Thirty Years

The mound's excavation was not a single tidy campaign but a relay of digs stretched across roughly three decades, each one peeling back a little more of the site. Alexander Cunningham, by then the founding Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, opened the first trenches at the western end of the mound in March and November of 1871, and returned to it again a decade later, in 1881-82. F. S. Growse worked the northern portion of the site in 1875. Then, between 1887 and 1896, James Burgess and a young German-born ASI officer named Alois Anton Führer extended the excavation steadily eastward, uncovering more of the mound with each successive season.

It was Führer, digging in 1890-91, who made the single most important discovery at the site: the buried remains of an ancient Jain stupa, together with two associated temples, sunk beneath

centuries of later debris. Nothing quite like it had been found before. Stupas — the dome-shaped reliquary mounds so familiar from Buddhist archaeology — were known to Jain religious texts, which spoke of monuments built to honour the Tirthankaras, but no physical Jain stupa had ever actually been excavated. Führer's dig at Kankali Tila changed that at a stroke, turning a textual claim into a confirmed archaeological fact.

5.3 A Stupa "Built by the Gods"

What makes the Kankali Tila stupa still more remarkable is that its own worshippers, writing in the first and second centuries CE, already regarded it as impossibly old. An inscription dated to the Kushana year 79 — corresponding to around 156-157 CE — refers to the structure as the Devanirmita stupa: the stupa "built by the gods." That is not a literal claim of divine construction so much as a stock phrase early Indian religious communities used for a monument whose actual founding had already passed beyond living memory or ordinary record by the time the phrase was carved — in other words, a monument that was already ancient by the standards of the second century CE.

Taken at face value, that single line of epigraphy pushes the origins of organised Jain stupa-worship at Mathura back well before the Kushana period itself — plausibly into the centuries before the common era, and by some readings considerably earlier still, potentially predating the earliest confirmed Buddhist stupas. This is a claim that deserves the same caution this book has applied elsewhere: "built by the gods" is a devotional formula, not a carbon date, and it tells us more about how second-century worshippers perceived their own monument's antiquity than it proves an exact founding year. But it is not empty rhetoric either. Other inscribed material from the same mound — sculptures and dedications in an archaic form of Prakrit script that scholars date to around 150 BCE or earlier — independently supports the idea that a Jain shrine of some kind stood on this ground for a very long time before the Kushana-era stupa that Führer eventually uncovered.

5.4 Tablets of Homage: The Ayagapatas

Among the thousands of individual pieces Führer and his predecessors lifted from Kankali Tila, one category of object stands out for what it tells us about how ordinary Jain devotees, not just kings, practised their faith: the ayagapata, literally a "tablet of homage," a flat stone slab carved

with a central image — often a Jina, sometimes a stupa, a dharma-wheel, or the triratna emblem of the three jewels — surrounded by an elaborate decorative border, and set up by a lay donor as a permanent act of devotion. Dozens of these tablets came out of the Kankali Tila mound, ranging in date from perhaps the first century BCE through to around 200 CE, among them the well-known Parshvanatha ayagapata of around 15 CE and a tablet associated with the regional ruler Sodasa, dated to about 42 CE.

One inscription in particular has become almost a byword for what these objects can reveal. A first-century tablet, sometimes called the Vasu shilapata after its donor, records that a woman named Vasu — described in the inscription as a courtesan — had erected a shrine of the Arhat, a hall of homage, a cistern, and this very stone slab, all as a single act of religious merit-making. It is a striking thing to find preserved in stone: not a king's edict, not a monk's biography, but the devotional record of an individual woman of no special rank, spending her own resources on a Jain shrine nearly two thousand years ago. Scholars have also noted that the ayagapata form itself likely grew out of an older, pre-Jain regional custom of carving shilapatas, votive slabs used in local yaksha worship — evidence that early Jain devotional practice at Mathura absorbed and adapted existing local religious habits rather than appearing in the city as something wholly foreign to it.

5.5 Where the Stones Went: Lucknow and Mathura

By the time the various excavation campaigns wound down at the close of the nineteenth century, something in the region of eight hundred individual Jain sculptures, pillars, ayagapatas, railing fragments, and gateway pieces had been lifted out of the Kankali Tila mound — a volume of material that no single local collection was really built to hold. The great majority went north to Lucknow, to what was then the Provincial Museum and is today the Uttar Pradesh State Museum, which remains to this day the single largest repository of Kankali Tila material anywhere in the world. A smaller but still substantial body of pieces stayed closer to home, in the Mathura Museum built specifically to house the district's own archaeological wealth. A handful of individual pieces — inevitably, given the period in which the excavations took place — ended up further afield still, in other institutional and private collections. Among the more curious survivals from the site is a headless sculpture of the goddess Saraswati, dated by its inscription to 132 CE and dedicated by a Jain metalworker, holding a book and a garland — a reminder that

the religious world Kankali Tila preserves was not narrowly doctrinal but woven through with the wider devotional culture of its time.

5.6 Why Kankali Tila Matters to Digambara History

Kankali Tila does for the Kushana centuries what Lohanipur did for the Mauryan ones: it turns a single, isolated data point into a continuous, documented sculptural tradition. The nude Jina image that appears alone and unexplained at Lohanipur reappears at Mathura by the hundred, carved across two or three centuries by named donors, dedicated by named monks belonging to named monastic lineages, and set up in a city whose own Jain community believed its principal shrine had already stood for longer than anyone could remember. The scale of the find is itself the point: this is not a stray fragment suggesting Jain presence, but an entire devotional infrastructure — stupa, temples, ayagapatas, and hundreds of individual images — operating in the open, at the heart of a Kushana imperial city, two thousand years ago. The next chapter turns to what the inscriptions on that material can tell us about the kings under whose reigns it was made, and about the monastic lineages, the ganas and kulas, that organised the community which made it.

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